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Much to apologize for, but not Barbie

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The conjunction of events is interesting. The 16-year-old son of a Soviet diplomat seeks to defect, saying he hates his country and its rules and loves ours. Then he takes it all back — in fact, says he never said it — and wants to go home right away.

Meanwhile, the State Department apologizes to France for having shielded former Nazi Klaus Barbie from French attempts to bring him back to France after World War II.

The Russian boy, Andrei Berezhkov, was whisked back to Russia after a phony press conference at which reporters were served transparent lies by Soviet officials and by the visibly frightened lad himself. No real questioning was permitted. The Soviets acted in character, thuggishly, treating their own personnel as captives even on American soil. Are we going to continue to put up with this? Shall we pass a Fugitive Russian Act, to promote improved relations with the Soviet masters?

The apology to France also makes little sense. Barbie was not known as a war criminal at the time the French first sought to claim him; they wanted him to testify about collaborators under the Nazi occupation. Setting aside the minor detail that this nation liberated France from the Nazis, French reprisals against collaborators after the war were such as to inspire squeamishness.

The historian Alfred Cobban sets the number of supposed French collaborators summarily executed after the war at a minimum of 30,000. Others put the figure as high as 110,000. The fact is not denied; it is just never mentioned.

Many, no doubt, had it coming. But others were innocent, including some who had actually fought in the Resistance but were falsely accused by the communists, who sought to purge postwar France of anti-communist elements. Ironically, the French communists had originally led the collaboration, only joining the Resistance when Hitler attacked Russia. Today they claim credit for leading the Resistance they so belatedly adhered to.

Americans who like to apologize for their country can find much to be apologetic about. All they have to do is study postwar history. Unfortunately, most of the people who are entitled to our apologies have been dead nearly 40 years.

Along with the Nazi menace, World War II brought hope to tens of millions under communist rule. The moment of hope began when Hitler betrayed Stalin. As the Germans advanced through Russia, many Russians saw their chance to turn against the communist tyrant.

A leading Soviet general, Andrei Vlassov, had fought ferociously against the Germans at Kiev and Moscow. Eventually the Germans surrounded his forces and captured him. Vlassov thereupon offered to lead a native army against Stalin.

Thus was born the Russian Army of Liberation. Vlassov offered a program of personal freedom, democracy, land reform, private property and amnesty for all who would cease serving communism. For a time he was hugely popular. As many as 800,000 joined his army and related groups.

The Germans used Vlassov, but the Nazi high command never quite trusted him, and for good reason. He professed equality of peoples and refused, despite heavy pressure, to issue anti-Semitic statements. He had no love for the German invaders, either.

Eventually, as both Hitler's and Vlassov's forces were driven west, they fought each other in Czechoslovakia. The Germans, retreating, intended to destroy the city of Prague on their way out. Vlassov prevented them. The Czechs gave Vlassov and his men a hero's welcome, strewing flowers over them in a parade. Arriving American troops joined the celebration.

Then, suddenly, Vlassov was arrested. The Allies turned him and his men, 90,000 strong, over to Stalin. Vlassov was shipped to Moscow, interrogated, and killed.

Unknown to him, the Allies had embarked on a program of collaboration of their own. Two million Russian and East European prisoners, exiles and refugees were, by prior agreement, herded into trains and sent back to the Soviet Union. Many of them, knowing what awaited them, killed themselves. The Rev. William Sloane Coffin, who participated in the American program as an American soldier, remembers seeing a fear-crazed Russian break a train window and slash his own throat on the jagged glass.

Some of those "returned" to Stalin had fled Russia at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. But the Americans and British were most complaisant to their Soviet ally, from Yalta to Yugoslavia.

The story has been told many times, and ignored as often. It is worth recalling — especially now.